

Of Bound Feet and Stiletto Shoes

Using China in the Introductory Anthropology Classroom

BY JENNIFER HUBBERT

Despite the increasingly complex and diverse information about mainland China available in the United States, in the US undergraduate college world, China remains largely a Cold War-inflected, imagined other: exotic, distant, fanatic, communist. Many of these conceptions of China are reflected in popular media representations familiar in contemporary Western society. From newspaper articles that blissfully proclaim the collapse of communism in favor of capitalist logics of production, to political speeches that pose China as a threat to superpower hegemony; from product advertisements featuring swarming masses of consuming citizens, to feature films that highlight seductive, willowy women in traditional garb, or martial artists flying through verdant landscapes, China comes to occupy a space of wonderment and intrigue combined with a dose of fear and uncertainty. Capitalizing on this space of conflict, I use China in the introductory undergraduate anthropology classroom to address common perceptions of China (and oftentimes Asia in general), by undermining the exoticization of the other through exploring assumptions about human behavior and normative values that are often understood as common sense.¹

Several times in the past, I have begun my introductory courses by having students read Jung Chang's *Wild Swans: Three Daughters from China*, a memoir of three generations of women in China who, through their experiences, come to embody the nation's tumultuous path to modernity. This bestselling novel, with more than ten million copies sold in thirty languages, contains dramatic accounts of foot binding and concubinage, Cultural Revolution excesses, socialist scarcity and Communist Party privilege, and concludes with the author's "escape" to the West.² I draw upon such dramatic accounts alongside my own personal experiences during the twenty years I have lived and worked in China, not to reify such cultural differences, but rather as a means to de-mystify the Asian other and to "mystify" Western practices and ideologies through comparisons with Chinese practices and values.

I begin my discussion of Chang's book by introducing Qing Dynasty foot-binding practices.³ *Wild Swans'* first chapter is entitled "Three-Inch Golden Lilies," in reference to the size of the bound feet of the author's grandmother. The first chapter explains in detail the practice of foot binding, the agony of bones breaking, the persistent, painful hindrance to mobility, and the subsequent match with a high-ranking general seduced by these small feet. Part of the classroom lesson involves examining x-rays of bound feet and simulating the binding of a student's foot. Students inevitably react with dismay and aversion to the practice, castigating the mothers and grandmothers

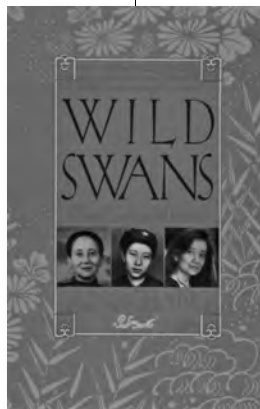
who "forced" their female progeny to accept the mutilation of their bodies in such a manner and questioning the logic and values of the culture that authorized it.

Following this exploration of foot-binding, we begin a discussion of the cultural construction of the body, considering how different cultures uniquely differentiate genders and maximize access to gender ideals through the physical transformation of the corporeal body. When asked for examples of ways in which cultural practices embody standards of gender, students typically focus on African female circumcision and infibulation as a primary example. When prodded to examine practices closer to home, they often begin to offer such cases as male circumcision, nineteenth-century corsets, and contemporary breast implants. A heated discussion generally ensues over the appropriateness of a comparison between foot-binding, genital mutilation, and breast implants, with the locus of the disagreement being over the notion of choice. Students inevitably argue that the decision to undergo surgery for breast augmentation is voluntary, whereas young nineteenth-century Chinese girls were given no choice in the matter. At this point I pull out a quotation by a past president of the American Society of Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery who argues the following about gendered bodies: "There is substantial and enlarging medical knowledge to the effect that these deformities [small breasts] are really a disease which result in the patient's feelings of inadequacies, lack of self-confidence, distortion of body image, and a total lack of well-being due to a lack of self-perceived femininity. . . . Enlargement. . . is therefore. . . necessary to ensure the quality of life for the patient."⁴ In conjunction with this quotation, we peruse a variety of magazines to contemplate how the perfectly gendered body is portrayed in popular culture.

This discussion of choice forces students to examine both how members of a culture have little "choice" in creating cultural notions of gender ideals and how certain forms of information, particularly those couched in terms of science and technology or the medicalization of the body, feel more legitimate and more "truthful." Thus,

when small breasts are portrayed as a medical problem, as psychologically and therefore physically debilitating, it makes breast augmentation seem a logical step to personhood. Following this discussion, students begin to understand how Western practices, such as breast implants, can be compared to Chinese foot-binding and African female circumcision in terms of their social symbolism and cultural imperatives for gender. I end the discussion by highlighting the recent growth in the United States of toe-shortening surgeries, designed to better enable the female foot to wedge into pointy-toed, stiletto pumps.

The next section of *Wild Swans* chronicles the experiences of the author's mother before and after the Communist revolution. Chang's mother was a committed Party member who devoted much to the socialist movement. Many of the descriptions of this era of high socialism draw attention to the potential economic pitfalls of a planned economy when chronic shortages of some goods, overproduction of others, hoarding, and substandard quality production figure prominently. The activity planned for this section of the book highlights fundamental principles of the political economy of so-



RESOURCES
TEACHING RESOURCES ESSAYS

cialism and involves the construction of a house using different colored Gummi bears.⁵ I provide students with bags of Gummi bears and toothpicks out of which they are to build a house following a specific design. They discover that their bags contain insufficient materials (i.e., not enough red bears) and substandard materials (i.e., broken toothpicks) and that they must barter, hoard, and compromise production standards in order to complete the construction project. After the project is completed, we regroup and discuss how this exercise provides an analogy to economic practices under a socialist system, and highlights state allocation of resources and the ways managers and individuals hoard, bargain, and trade to get what they need.

The follow-up for this class lesson involves a comparison between the command economy of the Maoist era and the capitalist economy of the contemporary years. Here, I draw strongly upon my own research in China and the many conversations I have had with individuals who came of age during the 1950s, an era they remember as the “Golden Age.” While many of these individuals expressed dissatisfaction with the availability and quality of consumer products during the Maoist era, they also drew attention to the sense of community that existed despite this lack of systematic access to material goods. As one Chinese literature teacher mentioned: “We were all poor in the 1950s, but we were all poor together, and besides, there was nothing to buy.”⁶ At this point, I ask students to contrast these sentiments with their understandings of China’s contemporary economic situation. Inevitably, the responses focus on the “economic miracle” in China, a miracle seemingly evidenced by China’s growing luxury goods market, the third largest in the global economy.⁷ Yet, I pose to the students, what is the cost of the capitalization of the Chinese market? While the dynamism of this luxury goods market certainly indicates the vast growth of wealth in China, it also belies the increasing gap between China’s rich and poor as measured by a Gini

coefficient that hit .465 in 2004 and is still increasing. In addition, I ask them to consider that while the Shanghai entrepreneur may be purchasing Gucci loafers, his or her rural counterpart is experiencing the decline of welfare state services that have accompanied this astonishing economic growth (i.e., increased and often prohibitive educational fees and lack of access to affordable healthcare).

The final third of Jung Chang’s book addresses her own coming-of-age story, highlighting her experiences during the Cultural Revolution and the tragedies that befell her family. Most of my students have very little knowledge of the Cultural Revolution and recoil at the descriptions of the seemingly random beatings, property destruction, and the general waste of human talent and ambition. I intend this class lesson not to condone the violence of the Cultural Revolution by culturally and historically contextualizing it, but to urge students to understand the link between cultural beliefs and knowledge and political practice.

I start this lesson by asking students to make a distinction between knowledge and belief. They generally come up with an answer that defines what we “know” as something that is defined as true or factual and what we “believe” as something that is accepted on faith as true and real. I help them to understand how the opposition between knowledge and belief is based upon an assumption about empiricism, the position that experience serves as the source of knowledge. After we consider a variety of beliefs in Western culture, students come to understand how oftentimes knowledge is perceived as being based on the idea that “What I know, I know; whereas what you know, you believe.” The second claim is based neither on empiricism nor positivism, but on belief and tradition, i.e., on culture. Therefore, one perspective is that belief can be understood as a cultural product that sometimes makes it difficult to differentiate between belief and “fact.” As such, students begin to understand how their own political system—democracy—is a practice, but also a be-

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lief system or ideology. At this point, students are ready to apply these ideas to their study of the Cultural Revolution. This perspective allows them to grasp with greater clarity political systems that philosophically run counter to their own system and how political practice both inflects and is inflected by political economies of power and material realities.

Wild Swans ends with a brief account of Jung Chang's departure for the West, a departure she poses as an "escape." Through this concept of escape, I encourage students to consider how the author's representations and personal history are linked. How does Jung Chang's family background affect how she portrays her experiences? How does an American reader's political position affect reception of the

"normal and abnormal" based upon their individual experiences. Yet such a pedagogical approach is not merely directed at suggesting that we are all equally subject to seemingly bizarre body norms and illogical economic systems, but to enable us to understand the limits of cultural relativism as well. While a cultural relativist approach allows one to contextualize the dissimilar practices of cultural others, its application sometimes has a tendency to ignore the impact of political repression and economic imperative, and, at its extreme, to act as an apology for cultural institutions that advocate violence.⁹ Certainly a quick glance at the results of China's one-child birth control policy—the high rates of abandonment of female babies and abortion of female fetuses, understood when considering China's traditional family

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work? Jung Chang comes from a family of intellectuals and high-level Communist Party members. While her experiences in China were sometimes tragic, they do not represent those of all others. I ask my students to imagine they are poor peasants in the Chinese countryside and consider if perhaps those experiences might in fact have been different from those of the author. I then recount to them Moby C.F. Gao's story, *Gao Village: A Portrait of Rural Life in China*, about growing up in a poverty-stricken village, and how the years of the Cultural Revolution, despite being officially understood as 'ten years of chaos,' had positive effects, particularly by providing villagers with access to education, health care, and local employment opportunities.⁸

We discuss how an author's socioeconomic and political position may affect both one's experiences and one's perceptions of those experiences, and how a reader's experiences may affect interpretation of a book. To highlight this latter discussion, I ask students to recall the myriad ways in which Western media represent contemporary China and how that corresponds with or rejects a Cold War framework. A quick perusal of recent media offers countless images of China as a political and economic threat, and students have been quick to appreciate the weight of that genre of commentary on one's interpretation of *Wild Swans'* conclusion.

Wild Swans is effective as a teaching tool for a number of reasons. While on the surface the book seems to confirm the notion of China as exotic, repressive, and other, in practice, when viewed through an anthropological lens, it works well both to demystify Chinese cultural practices and histories and to mystify practices in the West that are often understood by students as "normal" and "logical." Yet, as I leave this text and its focus on Chinese cultural and political practices behind, I reiterate two central points. The first concerns the concept of cultural relativism and its limits, and the other with how to use these concepts as tools for the analysis of other cultural texts. My comparisons between foot-binding and breast implants and knowledge and belief, for example, on one level are intended to teach cultural relativism to students who initially make assumptions about

structure—is a prime example.

The second point I emphasize to students, as I conclude the study of this book, is how we might use our analysis of *Wild Swans* as a prompt for reading other cultural texts differently, to ask what is at stake in a particular representation and for whom. I begin with a discussion of my current research on the Beijing 2008 Olympics and ask students to bring in relevant texts (visual, written, oral) for group analysis. They are quick to discover that many of the materials they locate continue to be couched in Cold War terminology, replete with references to fanatic, robotic athletes subject to draconian training regimens, framed by somewhat menacing allusions to China's massive economic growth and status as a political pariah. Examining these media portrayals helps students comprehend the consequences of such representations.

The Olympics provide a cogent example, and even the most cursory glance through national newspapers is illuminating. One article, published in the *New York Times* in the summer of 2007, for example, stressed Beijing's efforts to improve the grammatical and vocabulary errors in the city's English-language signs.¹⁰ Called "Chinglish," author Ross Terrill offered such examples as "Don't Bother" (a hotel request for privacy) and "Chop the Strange Fish" (a restaurant menu item), as examples of improperly translated Chinese language phrases. However, rather than note how such efforts in Beijing are generally understood by locals to represent an attempt to facilitate foreigners' expeditions throughout the city during the Olympics, Terrill frames the efforts as "an Orwellian impulse to remake the truth."

Throughout the semester, I ask students to bring in outside materials that address the topic under consideration, and to apply these somewhat abstract concepts to real-life situations and representations. Thus, students leave their Introduction to Anthropology course with both a heightened interest in and appreciation for China, as well as a set of analytical tools. These new tools will enable them to understand cultural practices and beliefs as being to some extent relative to the environment in which they occur, motivated by similar desires and needs

despite highly varied surface manifestations. These analytical tools will also help students to understand the limits of cultural relativism and the political and economic uses to which it is put. ■

NOTES

1. I have also found the strategies and texts below effective pedagogical tools for my introductory China classes.
2. Several authors have discussed the use of Cultural Revolution memoirs in the classroom and the problematic nature of these representations. See for example, Peter Zarrow, "Meanings of China's Cultural Revolution: Memoirs of Exile," *positions*, 7 (1): 1999, 165–191; John Fitzgerald, "In the Scales of History: Politics and Culture in Twentieth-Century China," *Twentieth-Century China*, XXIV (2): 1999, 1–28. See footnote six for bibliographic information on two memoirs that challenge such representations.
3. This exercise draws upon the ideas presented in Laura Nader's article "Controlling Processes: Tracing the Dynamic Components of Power," *Current Anthropology*, 38 (5): 1997, 711–737.
4. Cited in *ibid*, 716.
5. This exercise was developed by Elizabeth Dunn in "The Political Economy of Socialism," *Strategies in Teaching Anthropology*, Patricia Rice and David McCurdy, eds. (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 2000).
6. I often use this opportunity to introduce Marshall Sahlins' classic discussion of needs and desires in which he argues that hunter-gatherers may have been the "original affluent society" in that their wants were limited and their surroundings adequate to their needs, enabling them to live healthy, satisfied lives on a three to five hour workday. Marshall Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics* (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1972).
7. Recent statistics on the Chinese economy shed doubt on this representation, showing 1) that the Chinese economy is likely forty percent smaller than was previously accepted, and 2) that three times the number of people as was previously thought are living below the World Bank's dollar-a-day poverty line, approximately 300 million people. Albert Keidel, "The Limits of a Smaller, Poorer China," *The Financial Times*, 11/14/2007 at <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/4eaba8b0-9255-11dc-8981-0000779fd2ac.html>, accessed 11/26/2007. Special thanks to Marty Hart-Landsberger for pointing out this article.
8. Mobo C. F. Gao, *Gao Village: A Portrait of Rural Life in Modern China*, (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1999). Another memoir that poses an alternative to Chang's story is the edited volume *Some of Us: Chinese Women Growing up in the Mao Era*, Xueping Zhang, Wang Zheng, Bai Di, eds. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2001). For articles on different public culture interpretations of the era, see Jennifer Hubbert, "Revolution Is a Dinner Party: Cultural Revolution Restaurants in Contemporary China," *The China Review*, 5 (2): 2005, 123–148, and "Recollecting Mao: Memory and Fetish in Contemporary China," *American Ethnologist*, 33 (2): 2006, 145–161.
9. I include here the structural forms of violence that include global inequality and the ravages of war. See Lila Abu-Lughod, "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others," *American Anthropologist*, 104 (3): 2002, 787, and Paul Farmer, *Pathologies of Power: Health, Human Rights, and the New War on the Poor* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).
10. Ross Terrill, "In Beijing, Orwell Goes to the Olympics," *New York Times* at <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/08/22/opinion/22terril.html>, accessed January 10, 2008.

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